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SUBJECT: YEMEN'S SALAFIS COME OUT OF THE POLITICAL CLOSET

REF: A. SANAA 708
 [B.](#) SANAA 1016

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (S) SUMMARY. Yemen's leading Salafis took a bold step into the political arena last month with a highly publicized conference in support of national unity, hosted by the country's largest Salafist charitable organization. Civil society reacted warily to the conservative religious movement's sudden public role, which many claim enjoys President Saleh's personal support. Such a partisan display by the Salafis may represent the beginning of a new era in Yemeni politics. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (S) Over the last two decades, Yemen's Salafis have carved out an important niche for themselves in Yemeni society (Ref A). (Note: Salafis espouse a fundamentalist interpretation of Sunni Islam closely connected with Wahhabism. End Note.) To date, they have maintained a focus on local, low-profile religious and charitable works. As recently as mid-April, Hikma Organization (a Salafi charity) Sana'a branch president Mohammed Saleh Aqlan told PolOff that the group had "no political interests or aspirations." Just over one month later, however, on May 27 and 28, Hikma's national President Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Dubai'i hosted a highly publicized Salafi conference promoting national unity, attended by over 800 representatives of 35 Salafist organizations from across the country. Dubai'i himself said that the conference marked a turning point for Yemen's Salafis, according to press reports of the event. At a June 8 conference on religious trends in Yemen, Abdulwahab al-Hamiqani, an official from the Salafist al-Rushd Organization, said, "There is no democracy that is perfect anywhere in the world. It's better to be restricted by religion than by culture." At the same conference, Hikma Organization representative Murad al-Qadasi said, "The security of Yemen is in our hearts. We desire stability, and don't want Yemen to become another Somalia."

¶3. (S) The attendance of and keynote speech by ROYG Minister of Endowments Hamoud al-Hitar confirmed the government's explicit support for the Salafi gathering. According to press reports, Hitar told the audience on May 27 that the Salafi pro-unity position was "a relief to us all." Journalist Mohammed al-Qadhi, who attended the conference, told PolOff on June 7 that Hitar said the government needed more support from imams, and urged them to use their sermons to encourage unity and stability. According to Qadhi, President Saleh donated several million riyals to the conference, although he did not personally attend. (Comment: The Salafis appear to be the latest in a series of religious groups used by Saleh against his opponents. It is believed that the President fostered the creation of the Islah party in the 1990s to act as a counter to the southern-based Yemeni Socialist Party, and deployed Islamic extremists against his southern enemies during the 1994 civil war. These actions, however, were kept relatively quiet, and are still denied by

some Yemenis today. Last month's conference was the most public evidence to date of the ROYG's close collaboration with the country's conservative Salafis against current elements of domestic instability. End Comment.)

¶4. (S) Members of civil society view the Salafis' growing political power as a troublesome trend. They worry that President Saleh has abandoned any pretense of dialogue with the opposition parties (Ref B), and is instead resorting to the tribes and the religious extremists to maintain control over the country. Dr. Faris al-Saqqaf, Director of the Center for Future Studies and an advisor to presidential son Ahmed Ali Saleh, confirmed to PolOff on June 7 that there was no dialogue at all between the political parties. According to Qadhi, Saleh has increased his public support for the Salafis to weaken Islah, a moderate Islamic opposition party, and the al-Ahmar clan, which has not held back its vocal criticism of the ROYG in recent weeks. (Note: The late Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, a powerful deal-broker, headed the Islah party until his death in 2007. The al-Ahmar family are Zaydi Shia and therefore natural opponents to the Sunni Salafis. End Note.) At the June 8 religious trends conference, journalist and Salafi expert Abdullah Haydar Shai'aa said, "What the Salafis say - that anyone who supports democracy is a non-believer - is dangerous. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda is spreading, but is it the democrats who are the non-believers?" Sheikh Yahya al-Najjar, a religious scholar and former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, said during the same conference, "It is unequivocally wrong for the Salafis to style themselves as the only true Muslims. It is wrong and it is dangerous."

COMMENT

¶5. (C) In many ways, the Salafis' recent unity conference represented a political coming-out party for the conservative movement and an unspoken acknowledgement of its strength. For the first time, Salafism in Yemen has a public face, and it is clear that the Salafis are willing to work with President Saleh when he extends his hand. While the movement's full political agenda remains unknown, it's not likely to go back into the closet any time soon. END COMMENT.
SECHE